Silences
A Book of Poems

Jagannath Prasad Das

This is the fourth collection of poems from the poet's originals in Oriya and establish yet another landmark in the poetic journey.

In *First Person*, the poet dealt with a world where there was no hope and from which there was no escape. *Love is a Season* dealt with man's oldest obsession, that of his own mortality. *Timescapes* was a journey through time where past, present and future were linked together in a celebration of life, love and death.

The poems in the present collection are about man's loneliness both within and in the world outside him, where everything is enveloped in its own silence. And its own fulfilment.

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SILENCES

Jagannath Prasad Das



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WHO KNOWS HOW MUCH TIME

Who knows how much time
adds up to eternity,
how many moments make an aeon ?
Who can estimate
the extent of infinity —
is it by arm's length
or by light years ?
How does one calculate perpetuity —
in minutes days months years
or decades and centuries ?

What is the measure of time —
split seconds or past present future ?
What can hold the tide of time —
stop watch or history ?

The rail lines towards the future
are complete in their own parallel run.
The train crosses
station after station,
horizon after horizon,
void after void.
The traveller looks at his watch
and content, goes back to sleep.
Ghost stations fly past
through nightmares.
The late night express flits
from platform to platform.

All the entrances are locked.
Unseen hands behind the counter
give out tickets
for the onward journey;
there is no time to look back.
Uncertain trains
are forever whistling ahead —
from morning to night
from conscious to subconscious.

The telegrams intimating arrival
are all lost;
and there is no one on the platform.
It is an alien land
seen only in nightmares.
The train stops on the deserted station
habit-bound for a moment
and then steams off
vanishing in the distant smoke.

Signal after signal
along the way
red follows green follows red;
the express train shoots through alarms.
The traveller does not know
how much is traversed
and how much yet to go;
how much time spent
and how much left;
how many ideas make for completeness;
how many instants make an age;
how much time to go
till the sun burns down;
and where to put your markings
between the stations:
on the museum walls
or on the calendar page.

At the last station,
Time waits with his finger
on his lips,
fulfilling all the promises
within himself.
But the meteor is worried
as it hurtles down:
how many moments is it
to eternity ?

IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS TO ASK

If you have questions to ask,
address them to the skies,
not to me.
Ask the eyes,
ask Time itself.
Ask them if the river
has anything to do with life,
or the sky with the future;
the meteor with love,
or the void with death.

It's no use asking me,
for I know nothing except
that it is April now
and a time to
take decisions.
But as for myself,
I only follow the minute hand.
I have six months' holidays
to savour my suffering
and to go back
to the clouds
with the raindrops.

I seek to resolve
all the difficult equations
of what is just and unjust,

right and wrong.
I try to account for
all my failures and attainments.
But alas,
when the frightful faces
of sadness confront me
in my witness box
and ask for my identity,
I hide myself
in my inner conflicts,
though I am innocent.

There is no sign of rain,
and there is no end to hope;
that is my cruel fate:
belligerent time,
and the heartless sky;
this is my sure destiny:
only a long vacation ahead.

COME, LET'S BURY THE RUINS

Come, let's bury the ruins
of our irritated days
within the four crumbling walls..
From the desolate skies
of our anxious minds
gather away the sunlight of sighs.
In the articulate valleys of regrets
let's console the rejected sunset.

Let some more time pass away thus:
arguing with the clouds,
embracing the horizon,
treating the hills with scorn,
and comforting the rivers.

When the sun's curse
melts the sky,
the coveted days would bid
farewell to the rainbow.
The weary waves of moonlight
would crawl back
from the raving horizon;
the dread of the new moon
would congeal in thick leaves;
messengers of mercy
would descend with
the darkness of seven nights.

No one deserves any pity.
Come let's therefore
strangle the feeble flicker
of the lamp posts.
Let's nail the shadows
on to the walls.
Let's banish all the words
and pull a shroud of fear
over the city.

Distances will come back
from relentless unknown woods.
Dense dark of repentance
will envelop all world's happiness.
Dare you then come back to me,
with your heart on your sleeves
to be partner in my sins ?

THE SIX HOURS SPENT WITH YOU

The six hours spent with you
were squeezed into the cyclop eye
of the train engine,
then vanished in the lonesome dark.

What fraction of time are six hours ?
Can they be stretched ?
Who can confine in a train compartment
compressed relationships ?
For that matter,
how can darkness be nailed to the tree ?
The wide island of angry clouds
awakened with a single call ?
Or the intimate moon plucked out
from the blankets of winter mist ?

The six hours will return
gathering themselves in a self-confidence
like escapeless echoes.
The six seasons will come back
from the death defying valleys of love
to the dream islands
on estuaries of fairy tales.

Where will you then go away
with the rains in your eyes ?
I'll find you easily

in the ashes of dead stars.
I'll gather you from the
winter-tipped dew drops of memory.
I'll search you out
amid the weird vestiges of nightmares.
All the pathways of my search
would converge on the precipice of your body.
Wherever you choose to descend,
I'll be waiting for you there.

When the abstract darkness
gets busy talking to the dreams,
we'd take the last train
to the valley of the stars.

WHERE ARE THE MORNINGS

Where are the mornings
which translate empty words
into heavenly music ?
Where are the stars
which light up flitting moments ?

Everything is distorted,
in the revolving mirrors.
All shapes are flawed and twisted.
What look like signs of love
are disjointed feelings
and disembodied desires.
The journey comes to an end
in the silence of unrecognition.
Intimate bonds suddenly snap
in a single hand-written note.

No one bothers about the
vanishing galaxies.
No one is moved by the strains
of personal melodies.
The resonance of words
crumbles into shadows.
Light crawls into the
blackholes in the stars.

When the darkness finally fades,
the place is deserted
except for the few men
on the cross-road,
with chains on their hands
and freedom in their eyes:
those who are fated to see
the morning of the imminent stars,
and whose nights are comforted
by the laughter of defeated souls,
when the chorus of dying echoes
adds a little blue to the skies.

GODDESS OF MY GRATEFUL GLANCES

Oh, goddess of my grateful glances
I worship you on folded knees.
It is you I sing hymns to,
oh, the last hope of my orphaned future.

You know all about me:
my incapacity for sin
my hesitations for virtue.
How my loving is helpless
in a strange impotence.
How my faithless promises
are steeped in pity.

My ordained goddess,
when you have distributed
your universal love
to all in equal measure;
oh, repository of all divine powers,
when religion, philosophy, history,
Rigveda and relativity
all get lost in your body;
I can assuage my fear and humility
in the protection of your eyes.
When the fragments of my being
are scattered away
in temple yards and blind lanes,
I will realise you bodyless
and outside of time.

If you appear
as the futility of achievement
at the moment of my triumph,
I will even excuse you
your divinity.

THEY WILL ALL COME OUT

They will all come out of
the temple together —
the pilgrim, the penitent, and the priest
for they can be together only this far.
There is no time for advice
and consent hereafter.
The one who knows will cross
the burning embers with a smile.
Only the passers-by
would worry about the gathering clouds.

What fire is this —
is this a sacrifice or a funeral pyre ?
Who is witness here —
the moon, the sun, the planets or the stars ?
Or the elders and the guardians
of the ten directions ?
Who is it that weeps —
the widow or the nursing mother ?
What are the thoughts about —
of the soul's pilgrimage,
or the commonplace return journey ?
What was this body —
soul's fortress or prison ?
Who will the extending fingers touch —
the listless feet of the inert body,
or the confused heir's hopeful forehead ?

The fire rages indifferent
in the maternity room,
unconcerned about the
admonition of the rains.
Fearsome faces look down
from the dark recesses of memory.
When the last rays of sunshine
slide off the lifeless brows,
there is no time to ask for amends.

Affinities go thus far
as the oracle announces:
no child will ever take birth here
unless the dead give their blessings.

WHAT DO THE EYES HOLD

What do the eyes hold —
only a vision of the breeze,
or expectations from the ship
in midocean ?
Where do the rains
of the night get lost —
in the indifferent generosity
of the morning,
or in the limitless compassion
of memories ?
What does intellect store up —
the trivial pleasantries
of acquaintance,
or the compound of
complete experiences ?

Or else everything is in suspense —
the lull before the pigeon
descends on the magician's hand ?
In the oyster-shell,
that which is neither
a drop of water,
nor yet a pearl ?
A tremulous *mantra* hovering
on the lips ?
Words awaiting articulation ?
Torn bits of paper floating
lazily around the lamp post ?

While one is busy gathering
one experience after another,
each event calls up another event;
each surprise leads to
another discovery;
each milepost points to the
milepost ahead.
How could one then point to
an assigned place here,
definite and final ?
Who knows in the arid expanse
how much is desert, and
how much handfuls of sand ?

In such uncertainty,
journeys will be left undone
and time will be spent
only in scanning maps.
In such flights of
interim time,
what solace will make me hopeful
from the morning's doubts,
to the last sunset of convictions ?
What realisations will conduct me
from deep faiths
to profound truths ?

ONLY YOU CAN OPEN THE DOORS

Only you can open the doors
of all the fortresses.
Only you can take off
the armour of vain defiance
from around your proud body.

There is a storm outside.
A cloud floats on your face
as the streaks
of your body's lightening
search for a private darkness.
When silence negates
all possibilities of being together,
only I can bear the rejection
of your razor-sharp eyes.

When rains cease
and the sky outside
goes up in flames
a blazing noon settles on your face;
a vermillion star on you forehead
a corona round your neck
and the bangles on your wrist
flash lightening.

You take off, as in a ritual,
the flames from around your body
and all your hesitations.
There is now the effulgence
of sunshine on your body
and golden promises on your face.
Will I be able to recognise
the re-incarnate you,
when you return to me thus ?

AFTER THE GUESTS LEAVE

After the guests leave
the carnival on the midnight lanes
comes to and end.
The music has faded away;
only echoes sigh in the breeze.
The last act over,
the stage is bare;
only the shadows of fuzzy shapes
brood in the dark.
When the morning infiltrates,
the audience goes back home.

The disembodied story of the play
crosses over the open-air galleries
and goes through portal after portal,
through avenues of trees,
looking for sympathy
from the departing audience.

When one returns home
whatever is left behind
is soon lost and forgotten.
Consolations get lost
in the silken dark of meaninglessness.
There is no time for brooding
when sun-kissed memories
slide down the body

and fires of regret
burn down classic griefs.

There is now preparation
for a new day,
a new stage, new sets, new music.
What a pity
that reflections are so flitting
and guests leave
when the curtain goes down
and remorse takes over.

I'LL GIVE YOU A NEW NAME

I'll give you a new name,
even though your identity
is scattered away
in the landscapes of dreams.
I'll confront you
in the nameless valleys
of unknown lands.
I'll discover you
in the epic silences of the skies.

When you return,
spun gold sunshine will be spread
across the sky like solace.
The afternoon will alight lazily
like a forgetful bird.
The last sunset
will swim into the evening mist.
And when you recognise me,
shadows of ancient sorrows
will float past you.

Misunderstandings which
could have been resolved
in a single gesture,
will not abate yet;
I'll stay hesitant till the end.

When you walk away
gathering the afternoon smiles,
the evening mist will descend
like a tender arrogance
and your face will blend
in the laments of the sky.

What use accepting the judgment
when there is no hope of redemption ?
After you have said goodbye,
what use analysing the evidence ?
I'll only be wasting my time
looking for your address.
I'm not fated
to repay all my debts
writing a single poem in your honour.

WHERE DOES THE CIRCLE END

Where does the circle end —
in the horizon, in the sky
or in remorse ?
Where does suffering start —
from the finger tips, the breasts,
or from a nightmare ?
Who is it that lies in wait
on the borderlines of the present —
runaway future or the imminent past,
the end, the beginning,
or only the sequence ?

It is difficult to size up sorrow
and remorse has no measure.
Where beginning and end
are shrouded in mystery,
in vain the search for the mid-point.
When you lose your way
engrossed reading the epitaphs,
the cemetery gates will close
and the sun will set.

It is not given to us
to hold on to the charmed past,
fulfil the dubious present,
and welcome the future
with open arms.

Why should we,
who are destined to live
through flighty dreams only,
then be looking for eternal truths ?

When we have mortgaged
our impersonal tomorrows,
it is no use
our casting dishonest glances
back at the days gone by.

THIS WAS THE NIGHT

This was the night
of our secret conspiracy,
making blue-prints
for our desires and sins;
simultaneous plans
for a suicide pact and
a compromise with the future,
as the rain continued
to patter on the tin roof
and the storm
blew away our intimacy.

We shed our tears
in the secret chambers
of our circumscribed desires.
We made our furtive plans
on the ruins of our futures.
We went through the formalities
of a pilgrimage to nowhere.
We made our intrigues
against unknown adversaries
and our very own destiny.

When the storm subsides
we would invite everyone in.
The hours will pass
in pretending not to understand.

But now,
the moonlight keeps watch outside
as the two of us conspire
in the closed room —
a room with walls
of subconscious bodies,
weeping windows of faces,
and the roof
weighted down by the night.

Do you think
we can bear it all —
the moon through the night,
the night through the moon ?

THERE WILL BE ANOTHER SUNRISE

There will be another sunrise, yet
in the thorny branches,
when the moon is exiled
unto the rejected islands
of sunshine.

The crimson balloon of a sun
will tear out of
the gift-wrapped season
and fly away.
Coloured buntings of music
will stream down from the sky.
Bevies of butterflies
will go merrily round the flowers.
Postmen will hand out,
in the mellowed love of tender leaves,
the first news of spring.

Penitents will come out
from their sun-worship
to reject such mornings.
There will be gatherings
for condolence and celebration.
They will all wait
for the gates to open
and for the morning to
rush inside the dark room.

From waist-deep water
the worshipper will invoke the sun,
but there would be no answers
from the dark.
Only the spring will get older
and the sun get nailed
on the crosses of the thorny boughs.

The secret mysteries of the night
will dissolve in the morning light,
as prophecies take over.
Only those dreaming of daybreak
even before the night is over
will go round the valley,
with lanterns in their hands,
looking for shadows.

OUR REMOTE RELATIONSHIP

Our remote relationship
is as mysterious as a blank page,
as faithful as the future,
and as dependable as the dark.

You are only a whiff
of the morning breeze,
how can a mere touch
be given a name ?
You are only a ritual
of remembrance,
how can your memory
be photographed ?
You are a blaze of colours
faithfully framed in the mirror,
how can the reflection be
caught with bare hands ?

The burden of describing you,
I know, is formidable,
as much as
it is superfluous.
But I keep on taxing my nerves
and consciously wipe off
all other names and faces.

I write hymns for you
till words are banished
from the alphabets
and my adult surprises
of intimacy dissolve
all my experiences.

The postman goes round
form house to house,
for the letters bear wrong addresses.
I realise all of a sudden
that our relationship
is beyond realisation and consummation,
but inevitable and complete
like forgetting.

SUMMER COMES DRESSED

Summer comes dressed
in grey dust storms
amidst the agony of dead gulmohurs.
Summer comes riding whirl-winds
firing the furnace of the sky.
The ball of fire shoots up
through chimney smoke
as waves of mountains vanish
in the yellow haze of fumes.

The paddy fields pine
for a gurgling stream,
and the sky thirsts
for a touch of blue,
as the postman distributes
handfuls of dry leaves
carrying news of famine and drought.
Roads vanish in a haze
leaving behind rows of cadavers
on the banks of oases.

Protesting hands come down;
the cursed ones look upward
at the skies.
The fluff of cloud
brings back on to the earth
cool and pleasant strains
of a death-bound melody.

THE ATROCITIES OF YOUR BODY

The atrocities of your body
are limitless:
ominous waves of your brows,
tempestuous oceans in the eyes,
storms raging in your glance,
dark clouds gathered on your face,
eternity spinning on your palms
and death lurking behind your tresses.

Even if you choose
to vanish beyond my searches,
the divine attraction
of your prison
will force me
to go back to the altars
you have assigned for me.
In this cursed land
I'll be destined to live,
where to think of you
is a violation of laws,
to write to you is sedition,
and it is high treason
to speak out your name.

You are born out of hurricanes
and nurtured by wastelands.
All your atrocities

go back to a primeval time:
your deadly sighs
your lethal voice
and your death-dealing silence;
the danger in your eyes
the terror in your hands
and the devastation
in your pitiless face.
All these, strangely,
draw me helpless
to a relentless you.

Here in this strange land
I find my wanting you
sanctified by protocols,
is very meet, proper and legitimate
like a Christmas-card friendship.
And my love,
defined by statute books,
is but the final sentence
to penal servitude
and transportation for life.

THE DAY BREAKS SHARP

The day breaks sharp at six
in the alarm clock face.
The hours are measured out
in medicine glasses.
After the siren at ten,
the count-down starts:
ten nine eight seven six.
The tryst is at six
in the evening
and then, only borrowed time.

The sky over the hospital
has only three shades —
white black and grey.
There is no riot of red,
no betrayal of blue;
no glittering rainbows
of resurrected memories
and no multi-colour dreams
in the blood cells.

The days are clad
in a strange whiteness.
Everything inside the room
is white bright and luminous —
the bed, the walls,
the nurse's uniform.

The devotee is busy
meditating on his bed,
chanting the million
divine names.
People who come to bid farewell
are crowding round
the stretcher-bearers.
On the side-table
the inevitable visit card
waits to be picked up.

When the clock face turns white,
all leave one by one,
and the doctor throws up his hands.
On the notice-boards of time
the seasons stick fairy tales
for the future.
The visitor rushes in
without waiting for a call.

A FLOWER IS NO METAPHOR

A flower is no metaphor,
but I'll understand you
when I touch the petal.
I will comprehend
the unspoken *mantras*,
the undone gestures,
and the silent shrieks
at the slightest touch
of the flower's fragrance.

You are the blossom
in the tresses of a sad girl.
You are an echo
in the desert of sounds.
You are a sweet humming
in the music-less quiet.
In the quiet afternoons,
you are the gentle ripple
of loneliness.

In the foliage of leaves,
you are buds of fingers
pointing at the future.
You are a face
blending in the clouds
of disbelief.

You are a hand
coming out of a cage of thorns.
In the wild solitude,
you are a drizzle of blessings
on the quicksands of remorse.

You keep on flickering
on and off, off and on,
though the flower is no metaphor
like the firefly.

IT'S NO USE KNOWING

It's no use knowing
the final truths.
It is only self-deception,
these mock-questions.
A fistful of laughter
will not stop the sun
on its track.
All faith is meaningless
for Time is the denominator
of all beliefs.
It is no use
co-relating cause and effect;
if you follow
the footprints of the wind,
all you'll get is despair.

When the passenger is busy
thinking of the next station,
the train overtakes the seasons.
Pall-bearers cross the tracks
with singular unconcern.
No, it's no use now
questioning the stars.
Get assimilated
in the procession of elements;
go back into the womb
and whimper in the darkness.

IT'S ANOTHER DAY GONE

It's another day gone
under your magic spell.
The day-break on your face
is a morning of soaring birds
and shimmering beaches;
a morning of pink sunshine,
of curtains shivering
in whispers of soft breeze
and chanting *mantras*.

As the sky gets lonelier,
the sun is now molten silver;
feeble sighs get lost
in echo-less abysses.
The meditating lone tree
is reflected on the sun-glass.
A brooding grey loneliness
descends on the landscape.

The shadows lengthen
in the breeze;
snatches of blue spread
on the flowing music
of the stream.
the afternoon oscillates
lazily in the intimacy
of forgetfulness.

There is no sign of
recognition in your eyes;
a golden sunset
settles on your forehead.
All the roads end there.
The sky is again deep blue
and a million stars twinkle
as darkness pervades
through every window of your face.

WHICH ARE THE DECISIONS

Which are the decisions
one is frightened of:
love or indifference ?
Or the causal relationship
of past and present ?
What is the cause for sorrow
in this resultless contest,
where winning is pleasureless
and loss is without pain ?

Events here have their
own sequence.
Banned processions
march across the nightmares
of ageing virgins.
Another year is discarded,
thrown over the horizon.
When afternoon shadows
start crossing the road,
the traffic policeman
flashes the stop sign.
And then the truce;
only the sunflower
moves in its guilt
from one anxiety to another.

Force of habit
again brings the adversaries
to the battlefield.
They are like two travellers,
unknown to each other,
facing each other briefly.
Then everyone has to wait —
complainant, defendant
approver and witness —
on the courtroom steps
awaiting the judge's
unconditional sentence.

When the promises of the day
lose themselves
in the legends of uncertainty,
all material evidences
become meaningless.
Indignant clouds
take over the skies.
On the court-room steps
one has to keep waiting;
but how long, oh how long
holding on to the account books
of one's countless sins ?

THE SHOW IS OVER

The show is over
and the magician's gone;
there is no one around
and it's time to leave.

When I left you behind
at the end of the night,
a mystery in a
dishevelled state,
I could only touch
your dream-filled eyelids
but once.

At the bus stop
there was a strange crowd
and all the faces blended
to fashion a likeness
which dissolved in your face.
Beyond this point,
everything is an illusion of memory:
all conversation, all leave-taking.
All journeys are
like handfuls of sand
slipping through the fingers
on to the sea beach.

After my straying days
when I come back to you
some morning,
I will be tired no more.
There will be no fear
of fulfilment in my eyes,
no remorse and no excitement.
You'll be waiting
on the very same bed,
your face a mask
of unsaid sufferings.

When I accept you,
there will be no memories;
only the torture
of silent words
and of all the pain
focussed in your eyes
in a fixed point.

IT'S TIME TO TAKE STOCK

It's time to take stock
of pilgrimages done,
of virtue and sin,
and of holy paths
yet to be traversed.
It is time to measure
how much pain in the blood stream,
how much love in the sighs
and how much smile
the eyes and the lips radiate.

The search goes on
as one goes round the circle.
Where are the *mantras*
to escape the circumference ?
What knowledge will equip us
to name the limitless ?
What wings can take us
on a flight
to enlightenment and beyond ?
What divine credentials
can bring sin and virtue
prostrate under our feet ?
With whose blessings
can we hold
the shining days in our hands
and wear the starlit nights
in our eyes ?

No one has any interest
and everything is in a whirl.
In the spiral of the wind
float the torn pieces of
appeals and memorials.
Appendices of experience
flow into the eddies
of the subconscious.

In the circle of light
illuminating the stage,
the clown sits helpless.
The noise of applause
comes back to the hall
ricochetting from the
semicircle of light.

There is a circle
within a circle,
the spiral grows
from one circle to another.
Memory swoops down
on the magic circumference
of the eyes' horizon.
There is a search
from one orb to another.
The cycle of seasons
follows the revolving time
from city to city to city.
The city awaits the rains
and then the summer,
but nothing changes.
What great understanding
can the winter's cold then bring
to the waiting city ?

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT

Have you ever thought
of our mutual loneliness ?
What is it that separated us:
the past, the future, or
was it time itself ?
Who kept us apart:
fugitive lover, mystery girl
or was it an eternal night
of fleeting memories ?

You know for certain
that we were the inheritors
of a relentless past,
and sadness was our birthright.
Why did you then
look longingly at the
firefly shining in the dark ?
If you knew that in friendship
love is not to be,
why did you then answer
the enchanted calls
of the mysterious moonlight ?

Our chance meetings
you might consecrate
at the altar of memory;
but in our private loneliness

how could you negate dreams ?
In the casual coming together
how could you reject
the predatory desires ?

There are no other
alternatives left now.
If you do not
descend from your loneliness
and come to my arms,
there will be no one
to console us.
Rivers will dry up
under the broken bridges
of unhappy days.
Monuments will collapse
under the burdens of silence.

The wind will blow regardless.
It will see and know all,
but if you do not come,
it will refuse to answer.

DR. JAGANNATH PRASAD DAS, acclaimed poet, playwright and short story writer was born in Orissa in 1936. His publications in English include *First Person*, *Love is a Season* and *Timescapes* all collections of poems; *Before the Sunset*, *Two Plays* and *The Underdog*, plays: *The Magic Deer* and *The Forbidden Street*, collections of short stories. The plays have been translated into various Indian languages and performed on stage and radio and television. A wellknown art historian, his scholarly works on Orissan art include *Puri Paintings* and *Chitra-pothi*.

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